DOCUMENTING THE ORDINARY

– mobile digital photography as an agent of change in people's practices concerning storing and sharing of photography

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Abstract. Our research looks at sharing and storing of digital photographs from the cultural-anthropological perspective of people's everyday practices. Our case study was conducted within the Celtic-funded project EnComPas http://encompas.org/, which studied possibilities of supporting the communication needs of communities, especially families and home. In a study conducted in Arabianranta, Helsinki, we first mapped families' practices of storing and sharing traditional photographs through interviews; then studied the changes introduced by digital technology and especially mobile phone's camera technology through trials and renewed interviews. On the basis of our findings we believe that the features of digital photography storing and sharing applications should be developed to support the needs we discovered in our study: easy mass-dumping, possibility to organise and reorganise photographs into albums which tell the story.

1. Background

In the recent years, there has been a steady increase in different commercial and no-cost web based applications for storing and sharing digital photographs. These include applications concentrated on displaying

photographs such as Flickr or Picasa (in combination with Google) and different storing and sharing possibilities connected to blogs such as Blogger, Wordpress or Live Journal. Additionally, photos are stored and shared in various social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, as well as networking services that support mobile use and location based information, such as Bliin and Jaiku.

Studies of such web based photograph applications abound, often focusing either on the development of new features, such as the above mentioned location based storing and sharing, or on the design of entirely new web services (e.g. MobShare by HIIT; Sarvas, Oulasvirta and Jacucci, 2005). Some studies also focus on understanding the needs of social groups, such as families, and then designing features that meet these needs better (e.g. Mobile Visibility by Tampere University Hypermedialab; Mäyrä and Koskinen, 2005). Additionally, some studies try to understand and analyze the practices of a specific internet based community.

2. Theory: Practices

Our research looks at sharing and storing of digital photographs from the cultural-anthropological perspective of people's everyday practices. From the theoretical point of view, practices refer to the habitual ways of doing that give our lives continuity. Practices are also a shared activity in the sense that they are meaningful within concrete communities or reference groups, life-styles, and cultures. Practices make our lives meaningful. But practices are not rituals, repeated identically. La Cecla (1993) compares the dynamics of all human knowledge to the practice of dwelling in a place. We depart from the known to confront the unknown, returning to our proper place. In the process we gain more knowledge of the world surrounding us, making it a part of our dwelling in turn. Through daily practices people appropriate their surroundings and the world, gaining knowledge and experience of it, solving problems and using innovative abilities. Repetition brings experience; the diversions innovation. Practices are thus in themselves phenomena that combine both the shared and meaningful habits, and singular or specific usage and creativity, the production by usage as defined by De Certeau (1984).

Mapping people's practices is also an important method for design which seeks to involve users as active participants in the design process. Already since the 1980ies Lucy Suchman (1987) has pointed out that "technologies are constituted through and inseparable from the specifically situated practices of their use". Through mapping people's actual practices concerning a chosen object or theme of development it is possible to understand how they are part of the user's life as a whole; going on to recognize the design

potential and guidelines for design in those practices. 'Practices' is thus both the key concept for ethnographic research, and the mediating concept between research and design, enabling the designers to find innovative starting points in ethnographic data.

3. Case: Encompas and Mediabasket

Our case study was conducted within the Eureka Celtic-funded project EnComPas http://encompas.org/. The aim of the project was to enable the creation of a system and converged residential services to support the communication needs of the many social communities in which each member of a household takes part (school, colleagues, hobbies, friends, family). (Rajanti and Vandenbempt, 2006).

The field trials of the Finnish research team involved the application concept Mediabasket, which enables storing and sharing of media documents: pictures, videos, text documents etc. The Mediabasket is shared between a group of members who all have right to add entries and comments, create media baskets and invite others to share individual baskets. At the first stage the Mediabasket was basically web software application, you could upload and download pictures in batches, as well as upload pictures via MMS. At the second trial was experimented a mobile Mediabasket, i.e. the Symbian application could be downloaded to a series 60 mobile phone, and pictures could be stored and shared directly in the phone.

The first field-trial was conducted in Arabianranta, Helsinki between 27.9.2005 – 4.1.2006. Originally six young families consisting of mother, father and a toddler volunteered for the trials. We held one recruiting meeting, one briefing meeting, conducted at the families' homes six background interviews and five mid-term interviews, and held a final group interview at University premises. None of the families had used existing applications for sharing and storing of digital photographs such as Flickr or similar ones.

In the first set of trials we first mapped families' practices of storing and sharing traditional photographs through interviews; then studied the changes introduced by digital technology and especially mobile phone's camera technology through trials and renewed interviews.

The second field trial was conducted with a group of six young volunteers between 20 - 30 years of age, and a family whose teen-age daughter went to USA for student exchange, and her American friend during the summer 2006. All volunteers were already familiar with digital cameras and most of them had a camera-phone. The second trials strengthened the findings concerning practices of storing and sharing digital photographs, without

introducing any new insights. Thus our paper will discuss mostly the data from the first trials.

4. Findings: Documenting the Ordinary

4.1. FORMER PRACTICES OF TAKING PICTURES

Prior to the trials all families had some kind of camera and a collection of photos of both parents since their childhood. Most of them had tried a digital camera and a camera phone, but only one family, had a digital camera in active use and only one family out of the six had used camera phones.
There were basically two kinds of patterns of taking pictures: two families were taking pictures at a regular pace and had a large amount of them in store. The other families would take pictures more sporadically, sometimes a lot, then leave it for a month or so. These patterns were reflected on their use of the application in the trials.

Most families took pictures in the obvious occasions like birthdays and vacations, but they had already found that a digital camera due to its large memory space makes it possible to photograph more everyday situations. All also expressed a wish to be able to take pictures for documenting and sharing more everyday situations, objects and settings. Their wish to document everyday life in more detail was clearly connected to the arrival of a child in their lives.

Especially one of the families had very clear aesthetic requirements and were taking photographs of professional quality, but it is important to note that all had aesthetic standards they had evidently given some thought to and were able to articulate concerning both the taking, storing and sharing of pictures.

For most families organizing, annotating and making a presentation of the photos was a future project. None had them all or even the majority organized, all referred to “boxes” where the photos were being preserved with the intention of creating an order some day. Thus, traditionally photographs are taken from memorable situations, and preserved for future use as an archive of memories and a tool for establishing one’s identity.

4.2. CHANGE BROUGHT TO PHOTOGRAPHY PRACTICES BY MOBILE DEVICES AND APPLICATIONS

During the trials using digital cameras and camera phones, the families realized their wish to photograph more everyday situations, photographing of course especially their child, but also their surroundings.

The first notable change compared to previous practices was the sheer mass of photographs taken, but also saved. The supposition behind digital photography has been that people can easily edit and keep the best shots. Instead they said that they delete only the most obvious failures, but keep even partially successful ones, because these transmit some specific feature or moment and fit into a story the pictures are telling.

The families were indeed interested in telling stories with the pictures, but they had no time or patience for annotating and naming the pictures, much less "writing novels" about the situations, as they expressed it. This applied both to the situations where the pictures were being taken, and to editing them afterwards. What was important was to tell the stories *with* the pictures themselves, through their sorting and arrangement.

The biggest change that occurred was the families' enthusiasm about the uses of camera phones. Whereas they had earlier used photographs as a way of capturing memories to be preserved, they now started to use pictures as tools for making notes of their everyday life and environment, as tools for sharing ordinary moments.

Pictures of family gatherings are representations of the event itself, of sentiments and memories attached to that particular day and group of people, taken of memorable and chosen situations (Benjamin 1977; Berger and Mohr ,1982). Instead a picture taken with a camera phone can be used as a means of transmitting and sharing the everyday experience. The families gave numerous examples of this, pictures taken of their office, their coworkers, the weather in the morning, the bus stop where one had to wait a long time, or what the child was doing in the sandbox. These pictures were then sent directly to the other spouse, or shown at home in the night accompanied with the stories of the day.

Of course one could take a regular camera to the office and document these situations but the point that the families made was that one wouldn't. The camera phone, basically because it holds two devices together, is taken to places where the regular camera wouldn't be. For the same reason the camera in the phone can be used discreetly as it looks like a phone, when it's used as a camera it isn't obvious to the onlookers. The camera phone is thus not used just as a phone with possibility to send also images, but as a camera with a possibility to be kept along habitually and to send images for storing and sharing purposes.

The camera phone thus created a completely new way of taking and using pictures. The picture itself or its quality was not so important, but as a means of adding another level into the shared and archived stories of the everyday.

The camera phone also "freed" the people from the aesthetic expectations they usually had about taking photographs. The change was very clear in the

practices of the family with highest standards, who started taking more "normal" pictures, without paying attention to strict aesthetic quality.

The findings of the second trial were, as noted, quite similar. The mobile Mediabasket was a means of instant documentation and communication: e.g. following the daugther's life at a distance, sending pictures from a bachelor party to show how it went, or taking pictures about clothing etc. for making comparisons for shopping purposes. The same logic of telling stories with the order of the pictures being the most important feature was evident also with the mobile Mediabasket.

5. Conclusions, design implications and recommendations

5.1. NEED FOR PHOTO DEPOSITARY

The marketing rhetoric for camera phones has highlighted the importance of the ability to share a moment with your friends or family by taking a photo and sending it immediately. However, the field trials showed that now that the resolution of the mobile phone cameras has increased, the camera phones are used for snapshot photography. This has two major implications: firstly, transferring the photos from the mobile phone becomes a very frequent activity. This is because the phones will always be unlikely photo storage and viewing devices. Secondly, the overall number of photos taken by ordinary user increases manifold, building up a large visual diary.

5.2. MASS STORAGE

As was discussed above, it is clear that the amount of digital photos taken by ordinary, non professional users is still increasing, placing a demand for an external long term 'mass storage' photo depositary. Thus the first and foremost challenge is to design a 'dump box' of digital photos, which is as easy to use as the envelopes and shoe boxes where paper photos are stored. The photo storage needs to be outside of the devices in use today, in order to allow for sustainable storage. Meanwhile, saving data on external storage discs or onto various terminal devices must be intuitive, as there is always a need to share the photographs with other people. The mobile instant sharing, either in situ or across the net such as Flicker with Shozu, do not diminish the need save these photos for future generations.

5.3. SEAMLESS, USABLE, MULTI-DEVICE SOLUTION

It must be easy and flexible to upload photos into the depositary with whatever method the camera or mobile phone best supports. At the same time

the images must obviously be also viewable with a variety of terminal devices, seamlessly and anytime.

5.4. PHOTO ALBUMS

The large single depositary is obviously not the only way that photos will be stored and browsed. When there is enough time and a need, these photos will be taken out, browsed, perhaps annotated, compiled into albums or just organised and edited. For digital photo albums to be as rewarding and fulfilling as the paper pictures, it is crucial that the users have full freedom to select how to display the images; the photo albums must allow for creative layouts, enlarging and resizing images because users want to have full authority on the aesthetic layout of their photos.

5.5. METADATA

The concept of metadata is very familiar to anybody designing a photo depositary. However, when users were asked what details whey would like to save with their photos, they had no wishes apart from the date and time. It was discovered in the field trials that when uploading photos, the users are not very concerned with tagging metadata to the images. The task at hand, which is uploading images, is not a moment when the images will be organised and categorised.

Thus it is very important that all possible metadata that can be attached to the images automatically, will be specified and attached already in the device. This metadata must then automatically move with the images to the database. The more there is automatic metadata, such as location of the image, the easier it will be to browse for the images in the future. It is important to also consider that the file types and data transfer protocols are likely to evolve and change many times in our lifetime. Consequently this photo depository's metadata must be stored and displayed in a very transparent manner. This will also result to the metadata being visible to the user, who can manually edit it.

5.6. VISUAL DIARY

The sharing of the ordinary snapshots with the family was done in the evening when narrating the stories of the day. However, sometimes the photos were shared during the day, through the internet site, where the family knew to check for new photos. After the photos loose their immediate importance as storytelling devices, they become a kind of visual diary. Thus the snapshot diary of the everyday must support this kind of instant sharing,

storytelling and messaging among family members or friends. But most importantly it must also remain as a depositary.

5.7. CONCLUSIONS

Digital and mobile technologies bring about changes in practices concerning photography. At the present these technologies do not offer tools for integrating and transforming old practices into new ones, or creating new practices. Photography and photographs are an integral and meaningful part of people's lives, and digital and mobile technologies bring photography even closer to the everyday. There is a clear design challenge to find tools that fit into the usages people have for documenting their ordinary life.

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